

10 June 1984

DIARIES
BY JOANNE MASON
LONDON

When the Bolivians captured and killed Che Guevara in 1967, they had to display his corpse and copies of his diaries to convince people that the famed revolutionary was dead.

Now once again the diaries have emerged into the public arena -- and they're causing an international rumpus.

Next month they will come up for auction in London, despite protests from Bolivia that the country is being robbed of part of its history.

The matter has become a major scandal in Bolivia. The country's armed forces say the papers vanished from their possession and Defense Minister Manuel Cardenas Mallo has announced an investigation into how they were spirited away.

The Argentine-born Guevara, who earned a worldwide reputation during Fidel Castro's Cuban revolution, kept a day-to-day account of his 11-month guerrilla campaign in the mountains of Bolivia.

His entries began in November 1966 and ended on October 7, 1967. The next day he was wounded and captured by the army.

After interrogation by the CIA, he was shot on October 9. He was 39-years-old.

A few photocopied pages of the diaries found on Guevara were laid out with his body for journalists to see in a small mountain laundry.

The originals, however, disappeared from public view until last month, when London auctioneers Sotheby's said they had acquired Guevara's two diaries and other campaign documents.

Cardenas Mallo has called on Britain to stop the auction, but Sotheby's says it has no doubt the anonymous owner, who is not British, has the legal right to sell the diaries.

Their experts are also convinced of the documents' authenticity. "We are 100 per cent sure we have got the originals," a spokesman for the auctioneers said.

Much of Guevara's writings, which have an approximate price-tag of \$350,000, are already available. They were first published by the Cubans in 1968.

The then Bolivian Interior Minister, Antonio Arguedas, fled the country after admitting he had leaked a copy of the diaries.

Declaring himself a Marxist, he said he wanted to stop the CIA using the diaries to justify new aggression against Latin America.

Last week Cuba denied foreign press reports that it was behind the London auction.

"It is infuriating that something as sacred to the history of Latin America as this document should be the object of such manipulations," Cuba's official Granma newspaper said.

The diaries are a fascinating account of Guevara's quixotic, and ultimately tragic campaign and a testimony to the courage and dedication of one of the world's most famous guerrilla fighters.

The entries reveal how Guevara wanted to make Bolivia "another Vietnam". His intention was to spark an insurrection which would spread throughout Latin America, provoke U.S. intervention and lead to a revolution which would destroy "Yankee imperialism".

The diaries make clear how carefully the operation was planned from Havana but now, essentially, the peasantry failed to rally to the revolutionary call.

Such insights were strategically important and a useful propaganda tool to the American and Bolivian authorities trying to counter guerrilla insurgency.

But the diaries also give a personal account of the harsh conditions under which the guerrillas struggled. They tell of the morale of Guevara's small band of guerrillas, who never numbered more than 51, as they trekked through the mountains in pouring rain.

Guevara records how the first comrade died "in an absurd manner", not in combat, but by falling in a river and drowning.

He also had a booklist. Among the expected works of Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin it also lists books by General de Gaulle, Sir Winston Churchill and novelist Graham Greene.

If the auction goes ahead, and the British Foreign Office says it has not been approached by La Paz to intervene in the sale, cash-starved Bolivia is unlikely to bid, according to Bolivian government sources.

They say the Cuban government, the Soviet Union and the CIA could be among the bidders.